

135-148 Transport system faces audit

Department says it changed procedures to improve accountability, efficiency

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The Legislative Audit Council confirmed Tuesday that it will take a look at the state's new Medicaid transportation system, which was criticized by seniors, their advocates and medical professionals at a hearing in Greenville Monday.

"There is a lot of legislative interest, it involves a lot of money, and it's a program that's been audited in other states and there have been problems found in other states," LAC Director George

Schroeder said.

The new system was panned at the hearing, held by Lt. Gov Andre Bauer, head of the state Office on Aging, as leaving elderly and disabled people outside waiting for a ride to the doctor, picked up hours late for their appointments, or without any ride at all.

The Department of Health and Human Services, which administers the Medicaid program, used to contract with county agencies, who subcontracted with transport companies to provide services for non-emergencies,

like doctor appointments and dialysis. On May 1, it began contracting with two brokers, who in turn dispatch local transportation companies with whom they subcontract.

The department said it switched to enhance accountability and efficiency because the former system was riddled with high costs, fraud and abuse. HHS spokesman Jeff Stensland said the agency welcomes the audit.

"Hopefully," he said, "it will

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help clear the air and answer some questions people have about he process."

Sen. Harvey Peeler, meanwhile, will hold a public hearing of the Senate Medical Affairs Committee today to examine the issue.

And Bauer on Tuesday called on Gov. Mark Sanford to name a permanent director of HHS.

"That vacancy, now in its fourth month, has resulted in a public perception that no one is responsible or accountable for decisions by this \$4 billion agency that is placing senior citizens and people with disabilities in danger," he wrote in a letter to Sanford.

"Testimony presented at a public hearing yesterday in Greenville indicated that this

Cabinet agency has not been conscientious in resolving consumer complaints arising from its new policies on the transport of patients to and from medical appointments."

Sanford spokesman Joel Sawyer said the governor has interviewed a number of candidates and hopes to have a new HHS director soon.

"In the interim, Susan Bowling continues to serve very ably in that role," he said, adding the former director left at the end of April, not four months ago.

Sawyer added that the concerns raised in Bauer's letter haven't been brought to Sanford before. And he questioned whether the letter was politically motivated, arriving as it did just as he put out a press release calling for a new director.

Schroeder said the audit should be completed by the next legislative session.

"It's a big project," he said. "It will take a number of months."